

BACK STAGE WEST

THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK

at West Coast Ensemble



Reviewed by Jesse Dienstag

Everyone has heard of Anne Frank, the young Jewish girl in hiding during World War II. But if you've never seen *The Diary of Anne Frank*, this beautiful production would be a fine first viewing. The greatness of the play, written by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, and newly adapted by Wendy Kesselman, is that the audience feels the horrors of war, not by witnessing the random violence inflicted on its faceless victims but rather by watching it slowly devastate a small group of people with whom each of us can identify. Well directed by Richard Israel, this is an excellent ensemble cast. Instead of taking the easy way out and dragging the story down into melodrama, Israel and the company find lots of humor, and somehow keep the relationships and struggles real. The results are painfully effective. You get the feeling the characters are just try-

ing to live their lives. By the end, we love all of them.

The story, of course, revolves around Anne, played with a driving passion by Kristina Bartlett. She's as frustrated as she is frustrating. Terrific as the caged canary, Bartlett flies around the set and is every inch the precocious, untamable, horny teenage girl we knew in grade school. When she declares, "I'm going to be remarkable," you believe she would have been.

As Anne's father, Clive Pearson is simply superb. He makes gliding among the roles of the group's leader, loving father, sensitive husband, and all-around positive force appear effortless. Jan Sheldrick is heart wrenching as Anne's mother, who seems like she could lose it for good at any minute. As Anne's more conventional older sister, Alyss Henderson is strong and sweet. Sharing the attic with the Franks are the more externally flawed Van Daans, played with subtlety and heart by Angela DeCicco, Larry Lederman, and David Anders Holt. They provide some of the biggest laughs and fireworks. As the late addition to the attic, John O'Brien is nice, the only one without a loved one around. Erika Gray and Patrick LoSasso also turn in very fine work as the two people doing everything they can to keep these eight alive.

The performers are aided by a great set designed by George K. Cybulski, lights by Frank McKown, and sound by Rye Randa, all under technical director D. Stewart Farquhar. You can feel the claustrophobia, but it doesn't feel forced or cramped. With great staging, multiple levels, and some nice silhouettes, all are given their own space. The images are often as strong as the words here. *The Diary of Anne Frank* says so much with its simplicity: The West Coast Ensemble understands this, and honors this true story with its production.

"The Diary of Anne Frank," presented by and at West Coast Ensemble, 522 N. La Brea Ave., Hollywood. Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 3 p.m. Feb. 2-Mar. 25. \$20. (323) 525-0022.